DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 250 CS 210 554

AUTHOR Autrey, Ken
TITLE The Personal Journal in Composition Instruction: A History.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Diaries; *Educational History; Expository Writing; Higher Education; *Personal Narratives; Rhetorical Invention; Theory Practice Relationship; Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Journal Writing; *Student Journals

ABSTRACT

The personal journal has become a standard component of the writing curriculum, yet there is little research to support dramatic claims for its effectiveness. Journals, which differ from personal diaries or common notebooks, are associated with the "Neo-Platonist or Expressionist" approach to writing instruction, yet adherents of other approaches also advocate their use. Journals derive from the commonplace book (a repository of observations), which was common in Greek and Roman rhetorical education as well as during the Renaissance. Another predecessor of the journal is the private chronicle, also an ancient literary form. Although in many periods of history autobiographical writing was frowned upon, many authors nonetheless kept diaries, such as Samuel Pepys, James Boswell, and Fanny Burney. Still, the personal diary has rarely been used as an educational tool. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, textbooks began to recommend journals or notebooks as memory aids, scrapbooks, or simply as writing practice. The modern reliance on classroom use of journals derives from Gordon Rohmann's 1965 book "Pre-writing: The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process," although his emphasis on sequential stages of composition has given way to more complex views of the writing process. The longstanding popularity of the journal may well derive from its flexibility and versatility in many types of classrooms. (SKC)

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Ken Autrey
Dept. of English
University of S.C.
Columbia, SC 29208
3/87

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The Personal Journal in Composition Instruction: A History

Conference on College Composition and Communication
Atlanta, Georgia

In recent years the personal journal has become a standard component of the writing curriculum. Nearly all college composition textbooks advocate their use. One prominent rhetoric, Maxine Hairston's Contemporary Composition, is typical; it recommends the journal as a creative stimulant, "a storehouse for material," a place for experimentation, and "a tool for learning" (470-471). Donald C. Stewart makes the journal central to his pedagogical system, calling it the "Birthplace of an Authentic Voice" (49). Claims made by Richard Marius are even more dramatic:

> Here is reason to keep a journal. You will learn how to observe the things that happen to you, how to sort out the unimportant, how to put your observations into words, and perhaps how to make sense of your life. (17)

There is little research to support such assertions. The recently published collection, Perspectives on Research and Scholarship in Composition, devotes no attention to the journal in any of its thirteen essays (McClelland and Donovan). And George Hillocks' substantial survey of composition research, although listing several entries pertaining to journals in the 100-page bibliography, does not otherwise mention this commonly used technique. No pedagogical practice has been so widely advocated yet so rarely scrutinized.

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The journal is closely associated with what James Berlin calls the "Neo-Platonist or Expressionist" approach to writing instruction. Claiming that this school of thought is a reaction to current-traditional rhetoric, Berlin finds Ken Macrorie, William Coles, Jr., and James E. Miller among its chief proponents. According to Berlin, these teacher-rhetoricians conceive truth "as the result of a private vision that must constantly be consulted in writing" (772). The journal, an embodiment of this "private vision," is thus of special importance to them. But journal-keeping is by no means limited to the Expressionists. For example, Ann Berthoff, a major representative of the "Epistemic Approach" to rhetoric, which Berlin favors, makes the journal prominent in her methodology (See 14-23).

Given the breadth of purposes assigned to journals, it is hardly surprising that they cut across philosophical, even disciplinary, boundaries. A medium that can gather ideas, record experiences, aid the memory, clarify thinking, and provide practice is a versatile medium indeed. Besides being potentially confusing to students (a point I will return to later), this multiplicity of purpose raises problems of definition. Standard reference guides, such as the MLA Bibliography and Education Index often list material pertaining to journals under diaries. And scholars have seldom differentiated the two terms rigorously. However, most composition instructors would probably agree with Toby Fulwiler that the journal falls between the private diary on one extreme and the notebook or commonplace book on the other (17). Textbooks often explain that the journal should be neither a diary nor a collection of common wisdom. Yet the journal as we now conceive of it derives from those contrasting forms and may, in fact, be neither fish nor fowl.

My main intention here is to survey the rather erratic history of this underexamined pedagogical phenomenon, not to belabor the problem of definition. But it is significant that for composition specialists the term "journal" has connotations that have arisen only over the past two decades within the limited confines of our professional literature.

One of the most distinguished ancestors of today's journal is the commonplace book, which has through the centuries been considered a resource for the speaker or writer. Of course, the concept of common places or topics for invention is at least as old as Aristotle. The Greek term hypomnema referred to a repository of observations, ideas, quotations, and maxims that the speaker or writer might want to recall for future use (Misch I 186). This technique was prominent in Greek and Roman rhetorical education.

There was a resurgence of interest in this idea-gathering mechanism in the Renaissance. Erasmus and Francis Bacon, among others, recommend the keeping of commonplace books. Richard Rainolde's rhetorical text, published in 1563, succinctly states the rationale for this pedagogical tool: "A common place is a station, dilating and amplifying good and evil, which is incident and lodged in any man. This station is called common place because the matter contained in it, doth agree universally to all men which are partakers of it . . . " (33 Spelling modernized). Donald Lemen Clark's study, John Milton at St. Paul's School, shows the prominence of commonplace books in the seventeenth century, along with other elements of classical rhetorical instruction.

Like the commonplace book, the private chronicle is at least as old as the Greeks. But down through the centuries, the two forms serve opposite purposes, one to establish commonality, the other to assert

individuality. In his comprehensive study of the autobiography in antiquity, Georg Misch notes that the journal impulse is already evident in the fifth century B.C. He writes, "the idea of a literary journal intime was at that time no longer remote from men's thoughts" (545). There remained a bias in antiquity against writing about the self; Cicero, for one, warns that such writing is open to suspicion (Misch I 187). Yet, as Misch points out, Cicero engaged in many forms of self-portrayal (II 357). In the autobiography of Libanus, the Roman orator, Misch finds diary-like passages, filled with "petty personal details" (546). And he reports that Synesius in his treatise on dreams recommends a dream diary or "night book" (547).

In the 4th century Ausonius and Gregory of Nazianzus both wrote poetry with some characteristics of a diary (548, 606). Gregory gave vent to his urge for self-expression in the following remarkable passage, quoted by Misch:

> I shall find my speech break forth from my soul, just as a welling spring, set in motion underground by a violent wind, rushes along invisibly in its buried course and somewhere breaks through and up to the surface . . . So it is with me. I cannot contain my passion within me. So, let it pass if I say even a wounding thing, the offspring of grief. It is one of the remedies for trouble to give vent to one's feelings. (600)

This Wordsworthian outpouring was the impetus for Gregory's poetic record of his spiritual growth, his contribution to a genre which in a remote way may be the precursor of today's therapeutic journal as advocated by Ira Progoff.

In her study of seventeenth century autobiography, Margaret Bottrall asserts that autobiographical writing appears "only when

the prevailing philosophical climate favors the study of personality." Perhaps this explains why the Medieval Era saw a waning of the autobiographical impulse followed by a resurgence of personal writing, including diaries, in the Renaissance.

Francis Bacon's essay, "Of Travel," recommends diaries as an aid to the traveler's education. He writes:

> It is a strange thing that in sea-voyages, where there is nothing to be seen but sky and sea, men should make diaries, but in land travel, wherein so much is to be observed, for the most part they omit it; as if chance were fitter to be registered than observation. Let diaries, therefore, be brought into use. (417)

We have the diaries of Samuel Pepys, John Evelyn, and John Manningham in the Seventeenth Century and those of James Boswell, Fanny Burney, and Henry Fielding in the Eighteenth, as evidence of this genre's continued importance. And surveys such as those by Arthur Ponsonby and Robert Fothergill document the abundance of diary-writing in the 1800's.

Unlike the commonplace book, the diary has only occasionally been used in education as a useful adjunct to other forms of writing or speaking. We might expect that the popularity of diary-writing in the nineteenth century would prompt rhetorical theorists to consider this as a mode of practice or invention. However, none of the major rhetorical texts of the nineteenth century recommends the keeping of a diary or commonplace book. We cannot attribute this to a deemphasis on invention. Sharon Crowley has commented on the prominence of this part of rhetoric in the nineteenth century before it became truncated and subsumed under arrangement and style. But, according to

Crowley, in such standard texts as H.N. Day's Art of Discourse (1867) and John Genung's Practical Elements of Rhetoric (1885) invention is largely a matter of mental preparation and rehearsal. It presupposes the possibility of narrowing a topic and thinking carefully through it internally before committing words to paper. This contrasts with the tendency nowadays for textbooks to prescribe external means of invention, such as journals or heuristics, techniques whereby the writer can discover meaning on paper rather than plucking it fullblown from the mind.

But the use of diaries was not completely unheard of in the last century. John S. Hart's A Manual of Composition and Rhetoric (1872) included a brief discussion of diary-writing along with other genres. Sandwiched between longer sections on "Letters" and "News" in Hart's textbook is a one-page section on the diary, which he defines as "a daily record." He notes,

> The subjects recorded vary, of course, with the age, sex, occupation, and character of the diarist. It is a form of composition more used perhaps than any other for recording religious experience. Travellers record thus their daily adventures and observations. Students, men of business, men of pleasure even, are wont to write down from day to day things which interest them, or which they desire particularly to remember. (271)

Hart calls this "the least exact and formal of all kinds of composition" and "a record made for the information of one's future self." He condemns the use of embellishments and figures of rhetoric and prescribes absolute honesty in the keeping of it.

In a book based upon lectures given in 1894, Arlo Bates advocates the journal or notebook for young writers:

> And here, at the risk of setting down a platitude, it may be well to say that it seems to me of the utmost importance that the professional writer, and especially the young aspirant for literary honors, keep a note-book. It is as foolish to start upon a literary career without the habit of jotting things down as it would be to put to sea without water in the casks. (148)

Bates claims that this is particularly important for aspiring journalists. But he does not specify exactly what should go into the notebook.

Twenty-three years later, Claxton and McGinniss call a notebook "indispensable" for the writer, its purpose being to aid the memory. In addition, they recommend a scrapbook of clippings, pictures, and other miscellany that may contribute to writing at a later date (66-67). At about the same time, a textbook for "college women" contains a chapter entitled "The Diary Theme," which the authors claim is worth writing not so much as an end in itself but for "facility of expression," "practice in many forms of writing," "increased power of observation," and "enrichment of life" (Moore, Tompkins and MacLean 291-293). In the 1930s at least one high school English series recommends the "diary or log" as a source of ideas (Canby, Carter, and Miller Book I: 142-143; Book II: 153-157). But through mid-twentieth century, the standard textbooks make no mention of journals or diaries. As Sharon Crowley points out, the most popular handbooks and rhetorics in the 1950's adhered to the tired presumption that invention consists of selecting a subject, narrowing the focus, jotting down notes, arranging them, and

selecting supportive details (158).

The journal's ascendancy in the classroom is most directly traceable to the 1965 publication of Gordon Rohmann's "Pre-writing: The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process." Basing his conclusions on a study at Michigan State, Rohmann recommends the journal along with meditating and forming analogies as techniques for invention. This is often cited as the seminal article in the shift toward process-oriented composition. While Rohmann's emphasis on sequential stages in composing has since given way to a view of writing as more complex and recursive, the interest in discrete inventional strategies, particularly the journal, persists.

Now, even relatively traditional handbooks sanction journal-keeping, and many rhetorics devote substantial space to this technique, often including sample journal entries to illustrate the range of possibilities offered by this versatile tool.

As a confirmed, if rather erratic, journal-keeper myself and as a teacher who has been requiring journals for years, I am a believer. Like the rest of you, I can recall students who found an "authentic voice" in their journals. When my classes convene on Monday, the first ritual is the collection of journals, my weekly pound of flesh. So my faith endures. But I'm beginning to wonder whether faith is enough. The personal diary and the commonplace book have long--if not continuous--traditions in our culture. And we know that writers learn their craft by writing regularly. But are we doing violence to these traditions by yoking them together? Here is a journal entry written a month into the semester by one of my students, an entry which I hope conveys as much about the subject at hand as it does about her teacher:

> Journals. What is the purpose of keeping a journal? Is it helping me to become a better writer? Is it just something for my teacher to give me to do for no particular reason? Is it to help me overcome my procrasination? Is it to make my mind work? Is it something to get on my nerves? Is it a diary? A book to write essays in? Something to express your thoughts and opinions in? Something just to give you extra points in English? A way of revealing yourself? Does anybody know the motivation behind the assignment given by a teacher? Does the teacher himself?

These are questions I often ponder, even as I tell my classes that the journal compels them to take charge of their own writing. I'm pleased when students raise these questions. In fact the journal seems most useful for those willing to engage in such inquiry.

Perhaps the unique flexibility of this medium, wedged as it is between the diary and the commonplace book, the private and the public, is its major asset. And maybe its historical connections with rhetoric, both ancient and modern, guarantee its efficacy. But I'm not sure. I think it's time we stopped taking the journal for granted and started examining its usefulness in view of its checkered past.

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